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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

20 August 1970

STAFF NOTE

SUBJECT: The Anticipatory Mode: The future as seen by one
pair of eyes in the White House

NOTE

On 14 August Mr. Charles Williams, Staff Director of the National Goals Research Staff in the Executive Office of the President, addressed the concluding session of OIR's week-long Symposium on National Goals and Priorities.* In his talk he discussed some of the philosophical and methodological problems which confront policy planners in their efforts to cope with the on-rushing technological revolution. The present note attempts to convey the main points of the discussion and to assess briefly the relevance of Mr. Williams' propositions to national policymaking.

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* This was the first running of the Symposium, whose scope and content reflect a welcome "new look" in OIR's management and training concepts. In addition to Mr. Williams, speakers included Philip M. Hauser, Director of the Population Research Center at the University of Chicago, on "Demographic Dimensions of World Politics;" Jean Mayer, Consultant on Hunger to the President, on "Hunger and Malnutrition Throughout the World;" Franklin H. Williams, former US Ambassador to Ghana, on "Race Relations in the US and Their Impact on Foreign Policy;" Timothy Wirth, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Interdepartmental Educational Affairs at HEW, on "Campus Unrest;" and Richard Scammon, Director of the Election Returns Center at the Governmental Affairs Institute, on "Politics and Middle America."

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1. The origin of the problems posed by Mr. Williams is fairly obvious. In past eras man's ability to adapt has kept pace with technological change. The agricultural revolution, involving the shift from tribal to fixed, specialized modes of food production, took place slowly and comfortably over several thousand years. In contrast, the impact of the industrial revolution was felt within a single lifetime -- thus, incidentally, reinforcing the illusion of "progress." Still, during this era, man's ability to adjust his social and cultural habits was not greatly out of step with his growing capability to alter his physical environment.

2. In the present century, however, the nice balance between technological advance and social adaptation has broken down. In the past 50 years alone the rate of technological change has soared exponentially. The time lag between the discovery of theoretical knowledge and technological exploitation of that knowledge has narrowed from a lifetime to a mere nine years; in some scientific fields it is down to 3 to 5 years. More importantly, the nature of scientific revolution has changed drastically. No longer is technological change automatically equatable with

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"progress;" indeed, in some quarters -- and not merely on the campus -- it is seen increasingly as a major obstacle in the pursuit of happiness. In short, the impact of computerized technology on our society and ecology has been so deep and pervasive as to introduce a fundamentally different qualitative dimension to technological change. It is our inability to perceive and master this new qualitative aspect which, in Mr. Williams' view, poses an historic challenge to the policy planner.

3. Traditionally, national policy has tackled a problem as it emerged from past conditions to become a "crisis" -- and then only when relatively complete "trend" information was available on its scope and parameters. This has usually meant a lag time of 3-10 years between initial perception of the problem and a willingness to deal with it. To this must be added the several years normally needed under our system of government to gain a political consensus on the nature and resolution of the problem. Under the present "reactive" mode of policymaking we have thus permitted ourselves the luxury of a 10 to 20 year lag between first awareness and final resolution of major national issues.

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4. Compounding the difficulty, when we do get around to dealing with a national problem -- which by then has reached "crisis" proportions -- we usually find that we have neglected the longer-range and side effects of its solution. New Deal and Great Society programs aimed at shoring up agricultural production, for example, have had the unforeseen "second-generation" effect of stimulating rural migration to the cities, thus adding greatly to urban blight. Similarly, "preventive detention" measures may get some potential criminals off the streets, but a secondary effect is likely to be a further clogging, and hence weakening, of our court and penal systems. Unless national problem solvers get away from this simplistic "direct-action → immediate-benefit" approach and begin to concern themselves with the negative and often destructive future consequences of their actions, the prospects of our reaching the 21st century intact will become increasingly uncertain.

5. What is needed, in Mr. Williams' opinion, is a new "anticipatory mode" in policymaking. We need perceptual tools which will enable us to deal with future conditions -- in other words, to recognize not merely the rate of change but its future qualitative impact as well. Put another way, we need to escape from the "tyranny of empiricism" and to adapt new epistemological rules to govern our approach to policymaking.

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6. This will require a shift from "reductionism" to "synthesis" -- from a concern with specific "crisis" solutions to a much broader awareness of the outside dimensions and consequences of policymaking. Just how this new mode is to be shaped into a practical methodological tool is not clear. On problems of nationwide scope (actual or potential) the requirements seem beyond human capabilities. A recent Stanford computerized research project has postulated something on the order of 20 million different "futures" for the US, based on a few selected social-technological-economic parameters. As a concession to their human customers, the researchers subsequently narrowed their parameters to bring down the number of "futures" to a more workable 2200. Still, the exercise gives some indication of the enormous problems facing the policymaker in trying to "anticipate" the multiplying side and "second-generation" effects of his decisions.

7. While the policy planner slowly becomes aware of the need to work within a vastly extended time and qualitative framework, moreover, both he and his constituents are becoming engulfed at an exponentially increasing rate by a still uncontrolled proliferation of technological "solutions." The result is "future shock" -- a growing psychological imbalance

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between our scientific ability to produce change and our social capacity to cope with its consequences. All of which poses a kind of grim paradox: The need for man to rise beyond himself to the philosophic heights of the "anticipatory mode" has become desperately urgent at the very time that society as a whole -- not excluding the policymaker himself -- is slowly being hammered into a cultural stupor.

8. Fortunately, Mr. Williams does not leave us standing helpless in this Armageddonian landscape. The "anticipatory mode" will ultimately provide the way out. Who are to be its practitioners? No elitist thinking here: the average citizen if given an opportunity and the facts, will prove capable of the right "anticipatory" reactions to national problems. This evidently does not include students, whom Mr. Williams sees as "running away" from the challenge, or "copping out" on the future. As for the rest of us, Mr. Williams says we must have faith in "human imagination."

9. One may perhaps be forgiven for not sharing Mr. Williams' optimism about the capacity of an American citizenry under "future shock" to respond to the demands of the new "historic era" -- particularly since the response, if it is not to die aborning, will have to be carried forward by a student generation which has "copped out." Still -- judgments on our society's regenerative

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capability to one side -- he does seem to be pointing in the right direction.

10. In the area of foreign policy Mr. Williams' approach is certainly relevant; though sometimes hampered by unnecessary "reactive" ballast, it is, in theory at least, already inherent in the national estimative process. The question is, how can this perspective be opened up to embrace the wider "synthesis" that Mr. Williams is talking about -- e.g., to provide new ways of assessing the significance of social forces underlying "crisis" phenomena in unstable areas and the side and longer-range feedback effects of US policy in specific countries. On this practical level Mr. Williams offers little help. Apparently, as he noted in his concluding remarks, we shall all have to "grope" a while longer before the requisite methodological tools are fashioned.

11. Meanwhile, the prospects for further official guidance are not reassuring. In the latest reorganization of the Executive Office Mr. Williams' staff has yet to find a new home, and he himself is reportedly out looking for a new job.

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| REMARKS: | | | |
| <p>The attached note is a bit un-orthodox, but [] suggested the theme might interest you and some Board members. I've placed a copy in the Reading Room, and I thought I might also send along a copy to Hugh Cunningham.</p> | | | |
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